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## Dancing in the office: A study of gestures as resistance

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## **Dancing in the office**

### **A study of gestures as resistance**

#### **Abstract**

Following the art-body-ethics turn in management studies we use dance as an analogy in order to explore how the body can resist organisational control in office work contexts. We argue that in office work gestures can be a site of post-recognition resistance. Drawing on two art videos and on dance studies, we explain that this is operated either through arrest or through flow. In fact aesthetic experiments in gesturing disrupt the work rhythm needed for organisational efficiency and enforced by organisational control. This allows us to contribute primarily to the literature on resistance in organisation studies and relatedly to the growing literature on dance in organisation studies through demonstrating how dance can be a source of resistance.

#### **Keywords**

Gesture, dance, rhythm, resistance, work

#### **Introduction**

This article wants to contribute to the ‘post-recognition’ turn (Fleming, 2016) in studies about resistance at work<sup>1</sup>. The context of the study is the way bodies move in the office and the underlying question is related to our embodied agency. Drawing on dance studies (Ruprecht, 2015) and using dance as an ‘analogy’ and a ‘heuristic device’ (Chandler, 2012: 876), we argue that gestures either through arrest or through flow can be a site of resistance to organisational control. Using dance as an analogy will allow us to emphasise the embodied aspect of resistance in rather disembodied office work. Through the analysis of two dance performance videos, we will follow Chandler (2012: 876) in providing ‘attentiveness to the rhythms of work – and to disruptions and breaks in rhythm’. This will allow us to focus on the ‘immediate physicality of work’ as a potential for resistance (Chandler, 2012: 874), mainly conceptualized as ‘post-recognition’ (Fleming, 2016). Resistance operates through a parasitizing or a disruption – for instance through manipulating objects or through moving in the office – of efficient office work rhythms. However, dialogue or verbal interaction with management is not sought. A secondary, related contribution of this article will be to the growing literature on dance in organisation studies as dance is in most of the cases not used to understand resistance, but rather as a way to reflect upon teams (Harrison & Rouse, 2014), leadership (Biehl-Missal & Springborg, 2015), ‘feminine creation’ (Biehl-Missal, 2016) or organisational space (Biehl-Missal, 2016).

We understand ‘gestures’ as ‘simply what people do with hands or other parts of the body’ (ten Bos, 2011: 282), that is to say body movements. Then, dance can be understood as a combination of gestures and ‘movement in space and time’ (Biehl-Missal, 2016: 184). In fact, dance studies contrast gesture with immobility and connect it to rhythm. Furthermore, Ruprecht

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<sup>1</sup> There is extensive literature on resistance in organisation studies taking a variety of approaches ranging from labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Edwards et al., 1995), Foucauldian (eg, Collinson, 2005; Fleming, 2006) to feminism (eg, Thomas and Davies, 2005) or inspired by Žižek (Contu, 2008). We understand resistance as a disruption of organisational control either at the micro level or the macro level. With gesture as seen by dance studies and dance experiments, the body appears as the main actor of disruption of organisational control. Our contribution draws on the ‘post-recognition turn’ (Fleming, 2016) at the bodily level of the gesture. We are not suggesting that other types of resistance connected to recognition (eg, Courpasson, 2016) or more subjective forms (eg, Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Harding et al., 2017) would not be relevant. For a recent and comprehensive review of the literature on resistance in organisation studies, see Mumby et al. (2017).

(2015) suggests that gesture can be conceptualized both as flow and arrest, as ongoing movement and stillness, linking it to different conceptions of embodied agency. Focusing on gestures allows us to provide a kind of micro-phenomenology of office work. As ‘dance is primarily a non-verbal medium’ (Chandler, 2012: 872), we will analyse how this physicality of gestures can resist organisational control through ‘post-recognition’ (Fleming, 2016). In fact, recognition (Honneth, 1996) entails from employees a practice of ‘participating in dialogue with those whom they resist’ (Fleming, 2016: 108) in the context of workplace resistance as exemplified for instance by collective resistance performed by French workers in the ‘insurance sector’ (Courpasson, 2016: 97). In other words, resistance looking for recognition favours communication and words whereas post-recognition is more articulated to the physicality of gesture and could be body-based, in particular through disruption of organisational control through flow and/or arrest.

It is not unusual that organisations invite experimental artists to intervene in their workplaces in the name of creativity and experimentation (for an overview see e.g., Johansson Sköldbberg, Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, 2016). This paper deals with two art videos based on gestures and resulting from two artistic interventions in office contexts: *Faire* by Marie Reinert (<https://vimeo.com/43380554>) and *BUERO BUERO* by franzthomaspeter ([http://www.franzthomaspeter.com/video\\_detail.php?id=1&lang=en](http://www.franzthomaspeter.com/video_detail.php?id=1&lang=en)), both produced independently in 2008, the first one in France and the second one in Austria. The videos were chosen because of their complementarity and the interesting discussions on gestures and bodily movements in offices that emerged when we confronted them at the beginning of our research process in 2013. The videos are a very suggestive empirical material: indeed, they do not simply describe office work, they show both its aesthetical and political potential, which is linked to a specific kind of gesturing. In a kind of aesthetic micro-phenomenology, the videos give a new intensity and thickness to office work. Depending on the working context both an aesthetic of flow (fast and melted gestures) and an aesthetic of arrest (slow and detached gestures) point at embodied resistance practices.

First, we will analyse how gesture was understood by management and organisation studies and how our approach is different. Second, we will review gesture and the study of dance in order to contextualise our work in relation to other studies upon dance in our field, in particular Chandler’s notion that dance is a useful ‘analogy’ (2012). This will also allow us to introduce Ruprecht’s argument within the framework of dance studies (2015). Third, we will explain our methodology and how we analysed the videos. Fourth, we will provide an analysis of the gestures as they appear in the videos. Fifth, we will carry out a discussion and link our double contribution to resistance practices at work and dance in organisation studies.

### **Gesture in management and organisation studies**

Gestures in management studies were first conceptualised by Taylorism and its project to measure and standardise motions of workers’ bodies within a functionalist framework (Taylor, 1911). The idea to measure workers in order to increase efficiency entailed an interest for gestures in industrial contexts through motion studies (Karsten, 1996). The main project was to integrate the detailed analysis of motion in scientific management in order to determine the single best gesture for every organisational task. This was underpinned by a functionalist agenda which is disconnected from our intention to link gesture with resistance, as opposed to control.

Since work has become much more immaterial, the study of gestures seem to be confined to

the field of ergonomics or human-machine interaction, in short specific fields of engineering. Management does not seem concerned with physical gestures, as if the discipline had totally forgotten that the word “hand” (*mano*, *maneggiare*) constitutes it. Only recently started organisational scholars to show a renewed interest in different aspects of gesture, just to begin with its absence in contexts of leadership. A study of managers’ embodiment at annual meetings shows how gestures are avoided as they run the risk of introducing contradiction or emotions in a rational context (Biehl-Missal, 2011). Sticking to words, facts and an organisational script thus often means avoiding too personal gestures.

Gestures always relate to the embodiment of work. For a whole range of occupations, gestures are an essential part of the work, for example at school, in the traffic or in surgical work where instruments combined with appropriate gestures often replace words (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007). However, we will analyse how gestures move away from a working purpose or task to create bodily movement disconnected from a directly functional movement, for example the right gesture to perform successful surgery. Objects also play a crucial role as their use changes our embodiment. Surgical work nowadays means more and more interaction with robots, which are very special objects. But it is enough to think about our use of various digital artefacts; not only have our gestures become very precise and small with the manipulation of smartphones and laptops but our heads tend to be bent on screens and our ears filled with earphones, the body being both subjected and amplified by technology.

Furthermore, an individual gesture can become a bodily engagement and sometimes even a political action, as Willy Brandt’s genuflexion in Warsaw in 1970 shows (ten Bos, 2011), but also Rosa Parks’ refusal to give her seat to a white man (Clarke, 2000). Uncommon actions of generosity in the business world have been labelled *beaux gestes*, underlying a close relation between ethics and aesthetics and thus linking the medieval knightly tales to stories about our leaders’ outstanding actions (Bouilloud & Deslandes, 2015). However, these political gestures or *beaux gestes* have a much more clearly communicative purpose than the gestures we will analyse. Genuflexion in Western culture has an unambiguous meaning of deference and respect, for instance to meet the Pope. Similarly, Rosa Park’s gesture can be unambiguously interpreted because it effectively violated segregationist Jim Crow laws; therefore she was immediately ordered to stop it. All of them are voluntary and are about sending a message, as opposed to the gestures we will analyse. In addition, the gestures of our videos will not be extra-ordinary – out of the routine of work – but will relate to mundane work activities.

In this perspective a study of factory workers’ gestures (based on secondary data) suggests their aesthetic dimension is often forgotten (Bazin, 2013). Bazin argues gestures have a dimension of elegance, here opposed to rigidity: ‘through experience, some workers develop such an accurate gesture that their elegance not only is visible to their peers but is also blindingly obvious to anyone, in total opposition with the ungraceful mechanical rigidity of the apprentice’ (2013: 389). Elegance thus has to do with ease of movement and accuracy, which comes from repetition, when the body learns and becomes one with the gesture. The present article emphasises the potential of working gestures to exist as resistance, and we will show that repetition and accuracy are still central aspects in the process of embodied everyday resistance.

As we have seen in this brief literature review, managerial, industrial and surgical work have been analysed through the lens of gestures in organisation studies but office work has not yet been an object of attention, perhaps because of its apparent immobility, which does not necessarily mean disembodiment. Office work being a condition that links many of us, its embodied and sensual aspects would definitely deserve closer attention and analysis, in

particular from the perspective of resistance.

### **Gesture and the study of dance**

In this section we will review the engagement of management and organisation studies with dance, which will ultimately lead us to engage with recent developments in dance studies.

Gesture and dance are inherently related; indeed a series of gestures either individually or collectively bring about dancing. Stating that work has many common aspects with dance, management scholars have recently engaged with dance. Relying on their observation of modern dance rehearsals, they state that coordination needs to be elastic, respecting both constraints of teamwork and autonomy of bodies, using both integration and de-integration (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). An ethnographic study of professional dancers shows how embodied agency is related both to vulnerability and passion as expressed off and on-stage in very demanding careers (Satama, 2015). These authors look at dance from the perspective of work to address issues as bodies' coordination and agency.

In opposition to this, looking at work from the perspective of dance as the present article does can bring forward new questions regarding movement from the within of movement and thus processes of embodied resistance. As we already mentioned we will draw on Chandler's use of dance as an 'analogy' to understanding work as this allows to (recognize the body as of central importance... to focus... on its movement in relation to others and to the setting [in which it is operating]' (2012: 866).

Dance is both discipline and overflow, closing and opening of the body; it makes it possible to explore the silenced areas of the body as a spontaneous, experimental and creative force that challenges organisational life. Carnival dance for example consistently has taken its energy from the human bodily capacity to overflow its own limits and to refuse confinement (Slutskaya & De Cock, 2008). This identifies the body as the primary site of resistance, and especially the dancing joyful body, which resonates with our argument that dance could be linked to post-recognition resistance in office work. Slutskaya and De Cock highlight that this carnivalesque overflow brings knowledge production: 'Carnival dance precisely offers a form of organization... and *knowing* which is dynamic, concrete and relational. Participants in carnival dance *learn* by engaging with others' (our emphasis) (2008: 868), which makes dance a privileged site of collective action, or if you will of embodied agency. The example of manifestations, walking and moving together in one direction, or of parties, dancing until exhaustion to common music, links dance to political action. In this article we will analyse how working gestures are reelaborated to become dance and how these gestures' own dynamic and rhythm then parasitize office work's efficiency.

As we argued above our secondary, related contribution will be to the growing literature on dance in organisation studies. In fact, this eclectic literature looks at a variety of objects such as *inter alia* teams (Harrison & Rouse, 2014), leadership (Biehl-Missal & Springborg, 2015) or space in organisation (Biehl-Missal, 2016). Symptomatically, in a recent special issue dedicated to dance and organisations studies none of the nine articles makes a contribution on resistance (Biehl-Missal and Springborg, 2015: 1).

The practice and theory of 'extended dance', which is an important notion in contemporary dance studies, can benefit to management scholars interested in embodiment. Already in the 1940s the somewhat controversial dance theorist Rudolf von Laban collaborated with

management consultant Frederick Lawrence: they were interested in a more balanced use of energy in movement to increase enjoyment of work through the awareness and practice of its rhythmic character (Reynolds, 2007). Dance studies can thus give us a deeper understanding of gesture, both from the internal point of view of the dancer's body and from the external perspective of the viewer's aesthetic experience.

Hence let us now explore some recent developments in dance studies, which will allow us to better understand gesture and stillness but also slowness and rapidity. An article about early gestural theory takes up various interesting aspects of the dancing body and especially the in-between of motion and stillness (Ruprecht, 2015). Dance theorists describe the flow of energy in the body in terms of production, distribution, expenditure and retention. In gestural theory an aesthetic of arrest (Benjamin, 2006) is opposed to an aesthetic of flow (Wigman, 1966). The first one states that what counts is the interruption: only the stillness of the body makes gesture visible. In contrast, the second one states that the body is always in motion, meaning that gesture is a natural vibration that cannot be stopped. The body is constantly in a state of 'stirring', affected by and affecting others through a type of vibrating energy or 'pulsation' (Ruprecht, 2015: 30).

In this second state there is a blurring of contours and a dissolution of forms that leads to a decentring loss of control or even an explosive body. While Benjamin writes about interruption as a 'non-static stillness' leading to self-awareness and political agency, Wigman writes about a 'vibratory standstill' referring to imperceptible yet effective micro-movements. What there is between movement and stillness can be discussed endlessly with terms as vibrato, shivering, shaking, trembling, but the final question is one of embodied agency. How intentional is gesture in the end and what does this entail for resistance? Is it us who are dancing or is it the earth trembling? Is it us who are still or is it the office imposing it?

For vitalists as Laban and Wigman who see bodies as vessels of an overarching energy, gestural agency is relative: dancers and public are reactive rather than active. On the contrary dancers who follow the reasoning of Benjamin inspired by Brecht believe in the halting of bodies to defamiliarize and deconstruct everyday gestures, for example work gestures. On the one side stillness is vibration and it is just as lively as gesture; on the other side stillness creates a suspended tension, pointing perhaps to the possibility of alternative movement.

To sum up our main contribution uses the analogy of dance to reflect on resistance at work as 'post-recognition' (Fleming, 2016). Our secondary and related contribution is to dance in organisation studies: we will provide an analysis of dance as resistance. In order to inform both contributions, we will draw on the idea that dance and gestures can be understood both as arrest and as flow, which will be illustrated by our empirical material. But let us first turn to the advantages of using an artistic methodology.

## **Method**

To go further than the pure observation of gestures by a sociologist or an organisational researcher engaged in qualitative research, we aimed to work with specialists in aesthetics and movements: artists and performers (Strati, 2007; Bell, Warren & Schröder, 2013). As most approaches of gesture (e.g., Morris, 1997 & Kendon, 2004) focus on its communicative or practical function, Formis (2010) suggests theorising gestures as independent attitudes that could be studied as such, without always referring to their meaning or their function in a specific context. The artworks we draw on in this paper investigated how gestures operate in office work

beyond their strictly functional dimension. Gestures surely show routines, efficiency in relation to machines and in general how bodies are disciplined by the working space but they also show personality, sensuality and elegance. In other words, when artists investigate gestures they are mainly interested in their aesthetic dimension, which is not necessarily opposed to their functional dimension but corresponds to their potential to break the office's routines and restrictions and hence to produce some kind of embodied resistance.

Therefore, we approach gestures in office work through the eyes of two artists who engaged with employees' gestures in two companies over a long period of time, extracted them and reproduced them in two art works about gestures. There are three reasons for such an approach. First, artists and performers are experts in the aesthetic of gestures, in distilling them from random movements and representing their basic ideas by performing them in videos. Second, the artists spent weeks in the organisations in order to observe and research the gestures and movements of the office workers on-site. With painstaking accuracy, they used artistic research methods and quasi-ethnographic methods to learn about the organisation and the office workers so that they were able to create an artwork that not only distils and reflects the gestures, but also presents them in an artistic way. Thus, the artwork helps us as researchers in organisation studies to focus on the aesthetic aspect, which is of interest for the field of organisational aesthetics (Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Strati, 1999). Third, artistic interventions in organisations have a growing impact (Johansson Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, 2016). They are used as interventions on different levels and can aim at personal development, team development or organisational development, also addressing change and micro-politics (Schnugg, 2014). Both artworks, *Faire* by Marie Reinert and *BUERO BUERO* by franzthomaspeter, have been produced as artistic interventions in organisations.

Both artists created artworks that extracted gestures from their context, which presented the gestures in an isolated form within the framework of a performance first to the respective office workers and then to the public. The performances were additionally produced as videos which are available online for repeated reception, reflection and analysis. Both videos are tributes to mundane and perhaps invisible office work: the first one is a choreographed performance where the office workers themselves stage their working gestures and the second one is a choreographed performance where dancers perform office work.

*Faire* and *BUERO BUERO* were both produced in 2008 in two different work settings, the first one in France (in a state archives centre) and the second one in Austria (in a media communication company). Both artworks are based on the performance of work gestures after the artists observed and worked with the employees for several weeks. We will describe the artwork, the artistic process and the generation of each artwork below when we introduce the performances. Shortly after their public presentation, we talked to the artists about their work, the process of its production and their intentionality. Although we had access to secondary data (press releases, pictures of the artistic work process) and interviews with both artists, the videos are the main data in the present analysis. Similar to previous studies on working gestures (see e.g., Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007) we have seen the videos several times for the analysis of the bodily movements, the way the gestures are performed and their similarity with real working gestures. Artistic representation can be used as a heuristic metaphor to investigate how we could move our bodies differently at work. Artistic research being rooted in practice, it somehow produces an embodied critique of office work, a method that seems adapted to the post-recognition turn in resistance studies.

Artworks that reproduce and deconstruct office workers' gestures give us the opportunity to

approach them with a new perspective, especially for management studies. As there are concerns about power relations between researchers, researched and images when social scientists are making their own images, it makes sense to use artworks as empirical material that are based on fairly long-term in-depth artistic research. Moreover, technologies can determine the meaning and effect of the visual material (Rose, 2007). In the case of these two artworks, the artists present the researched gestures in an extracted and deconstructed, and sometimes overemphasised way. This helps us to concentrate on the gesture, without focusing too much on their expressive or routine-like dimension in a collective context. Moreover, artworks can be argued to be critical and cultural texts alongside other sociological and anthropological studies (Harris, 2008). Even if their approaches are bound to personal methodologies, artists investigating work have much in common with anthropologists of modern work. Both the artistic process and the final work open up boundaries to new forms of thinking and understanding of the phenomenon they are engaging with (Borgdorff, 2012). Moving images are very rich data, including sound, cutting, and perspective of the artworks, all materials that produce new meanings as videos communicate different types of knowledge and information (Pink, 2007; Warren, 2008).

Based on the basic model for analysis of visual materials (Collier, 2001), we worked along four stages in our analysis. We began by observing the data as a whole, while looking at it repeatedly. We wanted to 'listen' to it, to find the overtones and subtleties and to discover connecting and contrasting patterns. We then proceeded with the second stage by making an image log and making notes on what we saw. In the third stage, we structured our analysis and compared both videos and the presented gestures. Only in the fourth stage, we searched for meaning by returning to the complete visual record and re-established a context.

## **Making sense of two art videos about office work**

### *Faire* by Marie Reinert, France, 2008

#### *1 - Context*

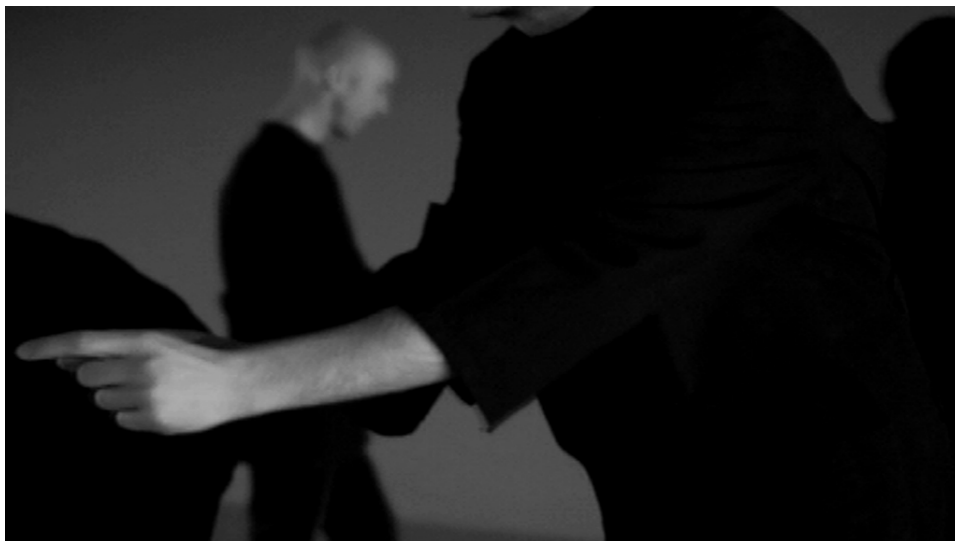
*Faire* is a 13-minute video in black and white. It is the result of an artist's residence, which took place in 2008 in France at Rennes' Archives Départementales (State Centre for Local Archives). The archives centre wished to inaugurate their brand new Ibos and Vitart building in an original way. The artist, Marie Reinert, stayed five full weeks in the archives centre. Her aim was to question employees and their bodily use of such a peculiar space, both transparent and massively bureaucratic in its structure. She conceives of her project as a true collaboration with employees: when arriving she had only some vague ideas, which became an artwork thanks to the fruitful encounter with 22 participants.

#### *2 - The film*

The first part of the film is a discovery of the building's interior. The first sequence is a silhouette of a man walking a bit heavily in a transparent passage. At the sound of a minimalist sizzling, we then follow what seems to be a machine recording corridors, stairs, elevators, meeting rooms but also some technical spaces, which we suppose are part of archives' mysterious activities. Sometimes a human figure, always the same bald man dressed in black, appears and vanishes quickly behind a door or in a stairway. A beautiful sequence shows the building's transparent façade while three people walk in opposite directions in the four identical glass floors. The camera often sweeps spaces back and forth, very much like a monitoring device could do to detect some suspicious activities.



The last 5 minutes of the video are central to our argument. It is a kind of mute choreography of work where we see a group of people neatly dressed in black performing precise gestures. The camera focuses on the hands but the gestures sometimes appear blurred and are not easy to recognize. Faces rarely appear and as each person is absorbed in his/her own activity there is no physical contact between bodies. After a while we understand that these are working gestures: picking up or putting down something, rolling paper, writing, be it with a pen or on the computer, taking something up from the pocket, manipulating machines. The gestures are both delicate and sensual, in part because the video transcends them to aesthetic movements: white hands moving against black clothes, without any sound (see picture 1 below). This mute and very elegant sequence stands in stark contrast with the somewhat alienating first part of the video. The film's title, *Faire* (doing), refers to a generic activity and suggests a reflexion about what bodies can do at work.



Picture 1: still from video *Faire* (source Marie Reinert)

### 3 - The gestures

The process behind the choreography of work needs to be explained to understand how the artist directed the archives' employees and questioned their experience of work. Reinert put together two groups of seven voluntary people with whom she chose to work in an otherwise closed space in the building, a space dedicated to future archives. Based on a methodology from ergonomics, each participant was invited to choose one sequence of his/her working day and reproduce it without any artefact at hand. Each group of seven people was then asked to stand in a circle, looking outward while performing the various gestures (see picture 2 below). A circular camera travelling around the performing bodies produced a mix of blurred images and focused details. While the camera was a threatening machine in the first part of the film, it here acquires sensitivity and fragility, nearly as if dancing with the recorded bodies.



Picture 2: The shooting of the video *Faire* (source Marie Reinert)

Through the employees' meticulous performance, the space but also the black costumes, *Faire* transcends simple work gestures into a silent dance through which bodies seem to follow each other although they remain clearly separated in their actions. The part on gestures of the film mainly focuses on hands, rendered white and delicate in contrast to the dark uniforms. Bodies follow hands' pace and seem to open up to something rhythmical and sensual. The fact that employees do not manipulate any objects contributes to a greater level of autonomy for their bodies, which slowly detach themselves from work. The video is a choreography based on archive work and possibly shows its agreeable aspects: the accurate gesture and the concentration needed in an archivist's mission, the affection for a specific task that needs to be well done. Gestures are at the same time accurate in their individual display and expanded to melt with each other, building bridges between bodies dedicated to the same mission: conservation of the past. The process of repetition used by Reinert seems to lead to bodily ease and shows the intersection between work and dance, the moment when a working gesture becomes aesthetic, meaning that the actor feels at ease while doing it and showing it. What is experienced through the video is thus the gesture from within, how it is felt by workers.

### *BUERO BUERO* by franzthomaspeter, Austria, 2008

#### *1 – Context*

The video *BUERO BUERO* by the Austrian artist franzthomaspeter is the outcome of a performance on office work. It took place in an Austrian media communication company and was realized in 2008. The artist observed employees' gestures and movements, spending long

hours in different places and offices of a media communication company based in Upper Austria, analysing the atmosphere, the furniture, the way employees dressed and moved. Based on the empirical material he gathered, franzthomaspeter created a performance that displayed employees' working life within the office: two dancers dressed up in office outfits designed by the artist presented their movements in a staged new version of their office. The two dancers wear the same black dress and enact extremely slow and rigid movements, a bit like automats. Their gestures are very neat and ironic; they exaggerate an office worker's rigidity (see picture 3 below).



Picture 3: Still from BUERO BUERO (source franzthomaspeter)

## *2 – The video*

From the performances, the artist produced a short video that focuses on the movements, exaggerates them and brings them to the centre of attention. The video, a still frame image, is 3:24 minutes long and shows a rapid, fast-forward version of the declerated performance. A blond woman walks around a big desk, sits down, shows boredom and then takes a folder and examines it carefully. A dark-haired colleague arrives and they greet each other, one takes a sip of coffee before signing a document, the other puts a stamp on an envelope. Then in a strange ritual, they turn to each other as if they were mirrors, each one of them putting on her lipstick with an exaggerated gesture and facial expression. The blond woman finally puts her forehead into her hand, bored or in deep reflexion and then stands up to close her laptop, which is also the end of the video.

## *3 – The gestures*

Gestures are mostly referring to small movements at the desk, manipulating various objects – envelope, cup, lipstick and laptop – and walking around a big common desk. The gestures are simple but bodies seem stiff, exaggeratedly straight and somehow closed by the general stasis office work seems to produce. The blond woman performs thinking and maturity while the dark haired one performs sensuality and hesitation; she walks around much more, slowly licks an envelope (see picture 4 below) and in general seems less dedicated to work. But what exactly is the nature of work in a media communication agency, one could ask, when is the body most productive? In the video bodies seem to be within themselves, narrowing their gestures to inhabit a limited personal space although the office workers inhabit a shared roomy space as

office. At the same time the women suggest a sensual relation based on gaze and small precise moves in space; they enact the sensuality of office life.



Picture 4: Still from BUERO BUERO (source franzthomaspeter)

Unlike the previous film, there is physical interaction between bodies and there are power relations at play in the open space. The visibility of the whole body is important, as is the way it moves and sits. At first glance, it seems boring office work but looking at the video many times we can grasp that it is dance, a slight shivering of the body. The few gestures performed have a specific tension: slow movements combined to rigidity produce something like an excessive presence. The dancers hereby give a new substance to mostly disembodied office work. In the video gestures are deconstructed thanks to slowness and mirroring, which suggests that even very small or mundane gestures could become significant if noticed and felt. What would happen if we slowed down all our gestures in the office, if it took us ten minutes to walk from the computer to the printer? To stand nearly still is not only socially awkward: affirming a bare presence also creates new sensations in the own body, giving it political power.

### **The embodied nature of office work**

All in all, the repertoire of gestures in both videos is similarly narrow and very specific, reflecting the limited physicality of office work. Although the body is relatively independent from machines and can choose its pace of work, unlike in industrial work, it seldom moves around and often shows boredom. The gestures displayed in the videos refer to small movements at the desk, using a computer or working with paper. Even if these habits could seem mundane they are also quite personal, they bear a specific sensuality. The way the blond woman puts on her glasses, the way they both put on lipstick, greet each other or close books and computers show the embodied and personal nature of office work.

In *Faire* there is a strange encounter with pure gestures: the performance is made without the artefacts that are physical counterparts in office work. The archive dance shows the sensual experience of the movement itself, it asks how it feels to execute the movement and what it takes to change it or to break its fragile composition. In *BUERO BUERO* the performers interact with each other and use available artefacts but there are slight signs of something else going on

in the open space. As the Austrian artist states, his art project ‘points to social alienation of office workers from their social environment’, meaning perhaps that they do not use all potentialities their bodies offer while in the office space, as if they were caught in numbness. Consequently, changing sequences, sudden closeness, bigger distance or even just slowing down one gesture has an impact on the tacitly executed but still learned interactions with artefacts and colleagues. The composition of *Faire* also points to the fragility of this interconnected system of gestures that dominate office work by using different camera perspectives, camera movements and positioning of the performers. In fact, gestures only need to be slightly altered to create something resembling a dance and perhaps the body always overflows the limits imposed on it by work. The videos emphasize the working body, showing both its alienation and the never fully contained sensuality.

Moreover, in both videos employees are displayed in formal, plain clothes that contribute to bodily distance between them. *BUERO BUERO* points at the formality one could imagine between two colleagues and even enhances it thanks to slow motion. In the first part of *Faire* the bald man always seems to walk away from the spectator, leaving us with the impression that he incarnates a human ghost in the machinic bureaucracy. In the second part of *Faire* the performers repeat their chosen work gesture over and over again dressed in black uniforms, which could have resulted in something automatic. Still the video melts them into a dance, suggesting the power of gesture to become something else and transcend the distinction we tend to make between function and aesthetic. Both videos thus play with formality, overemphasizing it, pushing it and producing an aesthetic experience. Is it not exactly formality and distance that create a possibility for sensuality?

The question of embodied agency and gesture’s intentionality is common to dance studies and management studies. In *Faire* the gesture and consequently the whole body is centred on the hand, while in *BUERO BUERO* the gesture is triggered by the office environment and the attitudes that are expected there. When the artefact is removed and bodies are presented alone, the working gesture becomes pure movement and shows work slowly becoming a dance. In opposition to this, when dancers perform office work they enact an intensive relation to artefacts, be it by slowly walking around a desk or signing a document under the gaze of a subordinate; in other words dancers give thickness to mundane gestures. What the videos have in common is thus an expansion of the work gesture, either through repetition and speeding up or through mirroring and slowing down. Both videos produce an alteration in the rhythm of work, which points at the centrality of bodies. In a kind of aesthetic micro-phenomenology, the artworks give a new intensity and presence to office workers’ bodies, which in turn suggests some possibilities for embodied resistance.

### **Dance as post-recognition resistance**

Organisation studies lately have focused on political, aesthetic and ethical aspects of gesture (ten Bos, 2011; Bazin, 2013; Bouilloud & Deslandes, 2015). Through the ‘analogy’ of dance (Chandler, 2012), we argue that experiments with gestures can provide ‘post-recognition’ resistance (Fleming, 2016) through moving away from organisational control with either an aesthetic of arrest or an aesthetic of flow. This last section of the paper will thus try to show the liberating mechanisms of dance, in other words the links there are between dance and resistance.

Going back to the perspective on gestural theory and the dancing body as in-between of motion and stillness (Ruprecht, 2015), it seems that *Faire* uses an aesthetic of flow while *BUERO*

*BUERO* uses an aesthetic of arrest. In the aesthetic of flow gesture is more reaction than action and occurs in a never-ending repetition of different but related gestures. Bodies have a natural vibration that cannot be stopped and the gesture consequently becomes only a part of a larger dance. Dance is everywhere and every movement is dance, even archive work can be transcended into dance. In *Faire* the gestures somehow blur into each other and become unimportant as such. What is important is the common dance created out of work. Opposed to that, in the aesthetic of arrest gesture is singled out and contrasted to immobility. Interruption of movement is a non-static stillness that might lead to self-awareness but also reactions from others to this apparent passivity. That is exactly what *BUERO BUERO* is about: a study of office work's stillness and consequently of the weight of the few gestures it produces. The office space becomes a stage for unexpected gestures to occur. Consequently, an aesthetic of flow and an aesthetic of arrest are two possibilities of resistance linked to gesture. Clearly, in both cases there is no attempt at using verbal communication, to formulate demands or discontent and bring about recognition (Honneth, 1996; Courpasson, 2016). Rather the body invents its own resistance in the slight alteration of the rhythm of work.

Gestures can be slowed down nearly endlessly, suggesting there is in fact no immobility, which is surprising for an apparently static activity as office work. Gestures can also be accelerated, putting all bodies in a flow starting from the body's own stirring. Gestural experimentation, which entails slightly changing the rhythm of work to reach other levels of perception, can bring about new perspectives to interrupt the boredom and physical slack of office work. Dancing in the office thus means to inhabit the workplace in a more personal way, see potentialities in the office space while breaking the habit of staring at the screen. At the individual level dance can enrich our perceptions and thus enhance our embodied agency. This simple exercise of a basic sensuality points towards resistance to organisational control which is not about language and formulation of demands or of conflict.

As work is more clearly linked to an aesthetic of flow and rapidity, resistance seems to be in the arrest of movement or at least the interruption of coordination and bureaucratic control of workplaces. To stand still is the first level of resistance to the ideology of performance, often linked to never-ending movement and rapidity, and which is connected to 'exit and non-negotiation' in relation to organisational control (Fleming, 2016: 108). Developing dance and specific gestures disconnected from productivity is a way to refuse engaging in verbal interactions with management, which in neoliberal capitalism often involves recuperation or 'silencing collective grievances, especially by way of "consultation" and other forms of inclusive exclusion' (Fleming, 2016: 108). To slow down or simply stop working can produce aesthetic ruptures through an excessive presence of the human body, which is what all occupation is about in the end. Dance brings the body to the centre of attention, which makes it the perfect ally of embodied resistance.

To dance in the office is to create a personal flow that will parasitize or disrupt the flow of work. It is by altering their rhythm that bodies enter a process of resistance and a disruption of organisational control. The personal gestures thus produced could remain at the level of micro-resistance (Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2003) or point towards broader antagonisms such as strikes or industrial action (Edwards et al., 1995). Our main contribution to the emergent post-recognition literature is that we focus on a micro-phenomenology of the body to show how gestures – either through arrest or flow – can be sites of resistance in office work. The dancing body does not need to be spectacular, it can conquest small spaces of everyday life, break the rhythm of work and thus be empowered. Office work, unlike industrial work, offers relative freedom for dance experiments. In other words, our approach is

complementary to analyses of post-recognition resistance that focus more on ‘emancipatory discourses designed to refuse work and employment today’ (Fleming, 2016: 106) as we show how embodied agency can operate at the level of silent and mundane office work.

Through arrest or through flow an alternative or a slightly different rhythm is produced in office work which escapes organisational control and which disconnects the gesture from its organisational task. This corresponds to a form of post-recognition resistance because a change of the rhythm of bodily movements does not look for communication with or recognition from management; it creates a form of corporeal complicity between different bodies in motion, complicity that goes much further than work. The dancing body that we have described in both videos has a thick presence suggesting sensuality between bodies but also an enhanced embodied agency at the individual level. However, the crucial point is that none of these gestures either through arrest or through flow can be easily recuperated and reintegrated by organisational control, even though they do not create a totally different and alternative organisation through carnival (Slutskaya and De Cock, 2008).

This ultimately allows us to refine the notion of embodied agency. The metaphor of dance through both of the videos we analysed allowed to articulate a kind of micro-phenomenology of gestures, that would otherwise be invisible or deemed as irrelevant to understand office work and organisations such as the repetition of a gesture disconnected from an object in *Faire* or walking around a big common desk in *BUERO BUERO*. In other words, using dance as metaphor through the arts-based methodology that we used allowed to zoom in on mundane gestures that could be deemed as neither relevant for management or employees. However, it allowed to focus on small bodily movements that are made in a repetitive and not necessarily conscious way. This suggested that embodied agency is shaped by routine, repetition and boredom, as opposed to only conscious and extra-ordinary actions.

## Conclusion

Exploring gestures in office work, we moved away from functionalist perspectives such as ergonomics or efficiency of coordination to focus on two artistic videos about office work. Drawing on dance studies (Ruprecht, 2015), we tried to demonstrate that gestures in organisations are to be understood either in terms of ‘aesthetics of arrest’ to which would correspond *BUERO BUERO* or of ‘aesthetics of flow’ to which would correspond *Faire*. First, this suggested that gestures are a site of embodied resistance implementing a disruption of organisational control through post-recognition (Fleming, 2016). Dance is movement but also vibrating stillness. To affirm stillness and a dose of passivity has implications in the midst of the ideology of never-ending movement, becoming and change. Our contribution is then complementary to Fleming’s analyses of discourses refusing to engage in recognition like the ‘arguments made by the Canadian anti-work movement’ (2016: 109) because we focus on embodied agency – through gestures – as way to explore post-recognition resistance. Second, this suggested that dance is not only relevant to think about teams (Harrison and Rouse, 2014), or leadership (Biehl-Missal and Springborg, 2015), but also personal occupation of space leading to collective resistance practices between dancing bodies.

For further research, it would be interesting to analyse how gesture as acts resisting organisational control could be articulated to an ethics operating through the body, that is to say a ‘corporeal ethics’ (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). Empirical work could be done from this perspective, for example to link gestural experimentation to actions of embodied generosity.



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## **Analysed artworks**

Marie Reinert

*Faire*

France, 2008

<https://vimeo.com/43380554>

(Password to watch the video: mariereinert)

franzthomaspeter

*BUERO BUERO*

Austria, 2008

[http://www.franzthomaspeter.com/video\\_detail.php?id=1&lang=en](http://www.franzthomaspeter.com/video_detail.php?id=1&lang=en)